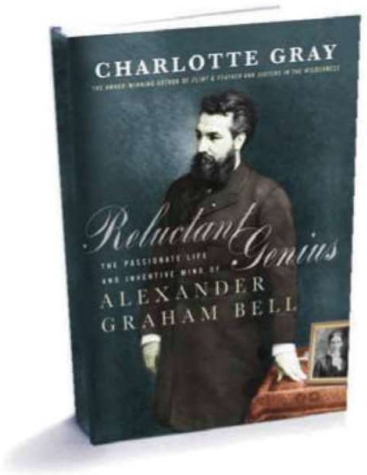

DIAL "G" FOR GENIUS

Reluctant Genius: The Passionate Life and Inventive Mind of Alexander Graham Bell
by Charlotte Gray
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Most people know at least one thing about Alexander Graham Bell – he invented the telephone. Primarily for that achievement, though there were other great accomplishments, viewers of the CBC's "Greatest Canadian" contest in 2004 voted Bell into ninth spot, just ahead of Wayne Gretzky. It was a remarkable honour for someone who technically never was a Canadian: Alexander Graham Bell was born and raised in Scotland and became an American citizen in 1882. Nevertheless, he did have deep connections with Canada. He spent a few years in Brantford, Ontario, in the early 1870s, where his parents moved after leaving Scotland for health reasons. Then, beginning in the late 1880s, Bell began spending several months every year in the Baddeck area of Cape Breton. On the shores of the Bras d'Or Lake, Bell pursued numerous experiments related to medical science, audiology, and even sheep raising. Aeronautical pursuits formed the largest part of Bell's creative life in Baddeck, from early kite-flying experiments to the success of the Silver Dart in February 1909. On his beloved Beinn Bhreagh estate, Alexander Graham Bell was buried in 1922 at the age of seventy-five.

When I sat down to read Charlotte Gray's new biography of Bell, *Reluctant Genius: The Passionate Life and Inventive Mind of Alexander Graham Bell*, I wondered if the author was going to tell me much that I didn't already know about the iconic figure who, in his later years, bore a strong resemblance to Father Christmas. The answer, I quickly discovered, was yes, a resounding yes. Charlotte Gray opens many fascinating windows into Alexander Graham Bell's life and times. The account starts with his childhood in Edinburgh, where he was raised by his mother, who was deaf, and his father, who was an orator and teacher of the deaf. Gray follow Bell across the Atlantic, first to Canada and then to the United States, where he achieved fame as the inventor of the telephone. But this is just the beginning of the story, as the account moves to Bell's ongoing quests for inventions in fields such as communications and aviation. Beyond Gray's portrayal of his insatiable scientific curiosity, she presents Bell as a humanitarian dedicated to improving the lives of the deaf.

To be precise, Charlotte Gray's *Reluctant Genius* is essentially two biographies rolled into one, with the second biographical focus on Alexander Graham Bell's wife, Mabel Hubbard, a deaf student he fell in love with in Boston in the 1870s. Chapter after chapter, Gray demonstrates how central Mabel was to Bell's success; she assisted her husband's inventive mind and was a true confidante. She gave Bell the emotional stability and support he required throughout his life. Mabel and her father, Gardiner Hubbard, encouraged Bell, and sometimes even insisted that he concentrate on inventions with commercial potential (which explains the aptly conceived title, *Reluctant Genius*). Without such influence from his wife and father-in-law, Bell might easily have let his quest for the telephone slip away and, just as important, he might never have applied for the U.S. patent that led to the family's wealth. It was the financial reward from that invention that allowed Bell to pursue inventing full-time. And it was Mabel, not Bell himself, who managed the family's finances, for Bell had no inclination or talent for such matters.

One of the author's challenges in writing this book would have been deciding how much technical information to provide to readers before delving into fields such as sound transmission, aeronautics, marine engineering, and other areas of scientific invention. A certain amount of instruction (or, re-introduction) is necessary for the general reader to grasp the significance of some of Bell's inventions and discoveries, even those that failed. To this end, the balance Gray offers is just right; she gives enough conceptual prompting for readers to understand the basic science involved, but not so much as to lose the thread of the narrative.

In *Reluctant Genius*, Charlotte Gray offers the reader insight into many intriguing events surrounding Bell. To name just a few significant, yet little-known incidents, we learn that Bell burst into a Mohawk dance whenever he felt overjoyed (which he learned from a friend on the Six Nations Reserve); he tried in vain to save the life of U.S. President James Garfield by developing a telephone probe; he had a close friendship with Helen Keller; he was one of the founders of the National Geographic Society; and he was a keen enthusiast for the Montessori teaching method.

Charlotte Gray is a masterful biographer, for she translated prodigious research into a clear and insightful portrait of her subject. Thanks to her gifts as a storyteller, the accounts of Bell, his family, in-laws, friends, associates, and rivals is riveting. Gray has produced a highly readable book that will captivate anyone interested in knowing the many sides of a man with a most inventive mind and in learning about Mabel Hubbard, the woman who laid the foundation for his achievements.

Reviewed by A.J.B. (John) Johnston, a historian with Parks Canada who has a special interest in the history of Cape Breton Island.